



Special Issue:
NATFHE May
2002 Strike

Bulletin for trade union and workplace activists—Produced by Workers Power supporters

THE AGITATOR NETWORK

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NATFHE Strike

All Out on May 28th and 29th

NATFHE's strike is getting tremendous support throughout the colleges in England and Wales. This is the first time that NATFHE has ever called for more than a one day national strike: this time we have had to show our anger at the insulting 1.5% offer from the employers.

The offer falls far short of our claim of £3,000 for lecturers as a step towards parity with schoolteachers. The bosses in the Association of Colleges (AoC) argue they cannot afford any more because of the gross under-funding of FE. We say – we can't afford to let them run FE on the cheap at our expense! If we hold back now we will see our wages fall back further and further.

It's true that FE has suffered from under-funding for years. The situation has become acute since incorporation. We have seen staff wages and conditions driven down while principals paid themselves inflated salaries.

Labour promised more resources for FE. But core funding currently stands at just 90% of 1995-6 levels! It said it would sort out the mess caused by cut-throat competition. But this turns out to mean the unelected Learning and Skills Councils

“rationalising” provision, developing “centres of excellence” while depriving local communities of educational chances and threatening the whole existence of general FE colleges.

We are sick and tired of delivering education on the cheap. Our students deserve better and we deserve decent wages and conditions.

We can't rely on either the government or the employers to side with us. We will have to continue our campaign alongside our fellow workers in Unison and other public sector workers like firefighters and railworkers who are showing they are prepared to fight for pay, conditions and services.

Where next?

This year we must keep up the pressure for the full claim. Last year, our strike won us an increased offer of 3.7% plus the promise of 0.3%.

However this still left us behind the schoolteachers. The leadership was wrong when it recommended we settle. It is true most members breathed a sigh of relief at the time, probably thinking that the TPI

money would go some way to making up the shortfall.

But in most colleges we have still not succeeded in getting TPI money consolidated and we have had to fight branch by branch to get this money distributed fairly. This year we should learn the lessons and use our energies to fight for decent basic pay for all.

This means being prepared to take further strike action and if necessary staying out until we win. Only the threat of shutting down the colleges can force the employers and the government to concede our claim.

Next weekend's national Conference should draw up an action plan which includes strikes at the time of enrolment and an indefinite strike to follow. We should keep up the momentum of the campaign in June with rallies, lobbies, a strike with a national demonstration or if possible action alongside Unison.

Unison members are anxious to join the action. Cross college and area action committees can help mobilise support and encourage Unison to ballot and strike either nationally or locally alongside us.

Waiting for Labour: not an option

Five year's of a Labour government should have been enough to dispel any illusions in Blair and co. Instead of better public services we've seen more PFI schemes and more threats to national conditions and bargaining. FE is still in crisis and students going on to HE get further and further in debt.

NATFHE's leadership has realised we need action to get our message across – but it is still hooked on the belief that some limited action and lobbying can persuade Labour to deliver the funding the colleges need. Yet the last five years of further cutbacks, funding crises and mergers should have told the leadership that this limited strategy simply won't work.

Of course we must press for more money for FE in the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) in July. But what if no more money is forthcoming? Or what if money for the colleges comes tied to more plans for rationalisation and more TPI type initiatives?

It is tempting for all of us in the union – both the leadership and branch activists – to believe that limited pressure can get the government to change course. But the truth is it will need much more determined action to achieve serious movement on pay and a completely different approach to be able to restore a decent FE service.

That is why we need to build an effective rank and file movement in NATFHE and other unions, to build solid action when the leaders do call for it and to deliver action even if our officials think it is more important to work with the

employers to organise lobbies of Westminster.

And it is why socialists must build an alternative to Labour's betrayals and an alternative leadership across the unions. The **Agitator** network is committed to this. We also support the Socialist Alliance which is planning another conference of union supporters.

Say No to Job Evaluation

The national conference will be discussing job evaluation. Last week NATFHE rightly pulled out of talks over job evaluation but the Conference will be asked to leave the door open for future talks. We think it should firmly shut the door.

Job evaluation converts bargaining to a set of pseudo-technical issues where "experts" determine the weighting to be given to various skills and tasks. This gives an extra advantage to the employers: they are the ones who can employ high-powered consultants who as "experts".

Some in NATFHE's leadership argue that we could use talks over job evaluation to persuade the Government to come up with more money, and to get a return to national scales and conditions.

This is mistaken. The Government and the employers want job evaluation to launch a new round of erosion of working conditions.

When they talk about "modernising pay arrangements" they almost certainly mean more pay banding, some sort of Performance Related Pay and more differentials.

We must reject job evaluation and organise against it.

Solidarity with Argentina

Teachers in Argentina are fighting to keep schools and colleges going. In many regions, teachers have not been paid for several months.

Last year, the Argentinian economy collapsed. The government had followed policies recommended by the International Monetary Fund: privatisation, slashing public spending and pegging the local currency to the dollar. But these policies created more problems. Now Argentina has a mountain of debt and the currency has crashed in value.

Protests by trade unions and communities have been met with repression. Teachers' rallies have been broken up. A teachers' leader was murdered on May 1st. Send messages to: (untercentral@arnet.com.ar)

More details from
www.geocities.com/argentinesc

Defend asylum seekers

Labour has launched an unprecedented attack on asylum rights. We say: asylum seekers don't create housing or job shortages, Labour policies do. Asylum seekers are welcome in colleges. Support the demonstration on June 22nd.

THE AGITATOR NETWORK

The Agitator wants to advertise and build solidarity for all workplace and trade union struggles — please send your stories in.

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